

## **GUIDELINES FOR TEST PREPARATION NORM-REFERENCED TESTS VIRGINIA STATE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM (VSAP)**

As a norm-referenced testing program, the validity of the Virginia State Assessment Program (VSAP) depends on the tests being administered under the same conditions and using the same procedures that existed for the national norming sample.

The tests used currently for the VSAP are the *Stanford Achievement Test Series*, Ninth Edition, Form T, Abbreviated (Stanford 9 TA) at grades 4, 6, and 9. These guidelines apply to the VSAP tests, as well as norm-referenced tests generally.

### **TEST PREPARATION PRACTICES**

The purpose of the test preparation guidelines is to advise on appropriate and inappropriate preparation practices for norm-referenced standardized tests such as those in the VSAP. While teaching to criterion-referenced tests, such as the tests in the Literacy Testing Program and the Standards of Learning tests, is appropriate provided that actual test items are not taught, teaching to norm-referenced tests is **never** appropriate. Because norm-referenced achievement tests are designed to measure a broad range of content, teaching special instructional content in preparation for testing is not appropriate.

#### **A. Practices which are **appropriate** for norm-referenced tests:**

1. Continue the normal instructional sequence and activities during the period immediately preceding testing as well as throughout the year. (Keep in mind that the norm-referenced VSAP tests were selected in part because of their match to the Standards of Learning, which form the core of the curriculum in the state.) The best preparation for norm-referenced testing is good general instruction. Research on the improvement of student achievement has found that student performance can be improved by:
  - Teaching for attainment of both basic and higher-order skills;
  - Using direct instruction;
  - Maintaining high student success rates;
  - Monitoring individual performance;
  - Providing feedback;
  - Maintaining good classroom management;
  - Maximizing academic learning time; and
  - Setting high expectations.
2. Students may be taught test-taking strategies which are not test specific, but which can enhance students' performance on a variety of norm-referenced tests. Test-taking skills include using testing time efficiently, understanding instructions, placing answers correctly on the answer sheet, using the problem-solving tactics of educated guessing, estimating, and working problems backward. Integrate test-taking instruction into subject area content as part of the normal instructional sequence and activities.

3. Expose students to a variety of test formats, including questions that consist of "none of the above", "all of the above" "not here", and "as is" choices, negative wording, and true-false statements. The Department of Education encourages the use of the practice tests developed by Harcourt Brace Educational Measurement for use with the Stanford 9 TA. These practice tests were used by the norm group during the norming process.
4. Teachers should make sure students, especially students in grade four and limited-English-proficient students, have practice in completing separate answer sheets.
5. Encourage students to perform their best on school work generally. The VSAP tests should be presented as being important but no more important than any other test.
6. Help reduce students' anxiety by informing them about the testing schedule, what the tests measure, how the results will be used, and how they might benefit from the testing. Offer parents some suggestions about what they might do to help prepare their child for testing. Such suggestions might include ensuring that their child gets a good night's rest during the nights before testing, and trying to avoid any disruptions in their child's daily routines during testing days. Keep parents apprised of the uses of test results and their relationship to the instructional program. Since scores from standardized, norm-referenced tests may be confusing to parents, take care to provide them with sufficient explanatory information to understand and interpret scores when they are reported. Such explanations should be clear and free from jargon.
7. Use group results from previous VSAP administrations, in conjunction with other program information, to identify and evaluate areas of strength and weakness in the curriculum and in instructional practices.

B. Practices which are **not** appropriate for norm-referenced tests:

1. Do not teach actual test items.
2. Do not conduct reviews or drills which address specific content of the VSAP tests.
3. Do not administer alternate forms of a VSAP test within five months of a regularly scheduled VSAP administration. Use of retired forms of the adopted norm-referenced test for practice is unethical.
4. Do not use commercial test preparation materials which are specific to the tests adopted as the norm-referenced tests of the VSAP. For example, a test preparation program geared specifically to prepare students to perform well on "the XYZ" test, if "XYZ" was the norm-referenced test adopted for the VSAP, would not be allowed under this guideline. On the other hand, it would be acceptable to have a program designed to teach general test taking strategies rather than one designed to have students perform well on a specific test. Furthermore, materials designed to address the instructional aspects of the adopted program or the objectives of it, would be permissible for use as long as specific content of the test was not included.

School divisions should review all materials being considered as test preparation materials for adherence to these guidelines. The Department of Education, Division of Assessment and Reporting, will be happy to work with school divisions in making decisions regarding the appropriateness of test preparation materials.